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Bull Run Again

Less than four months ago Americans drew a deep breath and launched a new Administration dedicated to the proposition that energy, intelligence, efficiency and a sense of purpose would pull America out of the grievous messes into which it had mired itself.

The process of extrication might be long and difficult, and Americans were so warned by President Kennedy.

But America, the young President said, was on its way. The long night of indecision was over.

No longer, his backers added, would official bungling involve this nation in such disasters as the U-2 affair. Not again would a President of this proud Republic seek out a Communist dictator and permit himself to be slapped in the face while extending the hand of friendship.

The new President was adamant on this last point. No summit conference, he said; no meeting with Khrushchev until the Russian bully boy had mended his ways and shown by contrite conduct and concrete concessions that he truly intended to establish a truce in the Cold War and work for a genuine peace.

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But four months have brought disillusionment. The confidence of last January 20 has been tempered in the chill of defeat.

First came the realization of the long, slow defeat in Laos, where Communist infiltrators simply pushed the United States and its massive foreign aid aside and took over half the country.

Then the stunning, quick defeat in Cuba, where every estimate was wrong and blame was shared by the military, the State Department, the Central Intelligence Agency and the scrambling eggheads who surround the President.

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The combination of Laos and Cuba has moved some Washington writers to compare the melancholy events of the past four months to the happenings of one hundred years ago.

Then a new Administration was inaugurated in March and the first shot of the Civil War was fired six weeks later. Totally misjudging the threat, the new President asked for 75 thousand volunteers who were asked to serve a few months, put down the rebellion, and go home.

The awakening came four months after the inauguration when a skirmish that was expected to be a sort of military picnic on the lawns of Washington became the disastrous Battle of Bull Run and the real beginning of the most terrible blood-letting in American history.

It is foolish to carry historical parallels very far, but it is not foolish to hope that Bull Run, an unexpected defeat which shocked the Lincoln Administration into a realization of the meaning of the war and reshaped the country's destiny, may have its counterpart for the Kennedy Administration in the disasters in Laos and Cuba.